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ABSTRACT

What styles of action do boys learn to use in tackling work problems? How are these different from what girls do? What particular coping styles are preferred in different cultures? What differences are there between working class and upper-middle class in their dominant coping styles? Such choices of strategies in dealing with tasks are related to school achievement, vocational aspirations, and kinds of satisfactions young people seek in their work. By combining such measures of motivation and behavior style with measures of aptitude, better understanding and better prediction of individual achievement is sought. The study also seeks information about how children are influenced by family experiences in the development of their coping styles. This paper offers preliminary findings from a cross-national study of school children from 8 countries. This work is the basis for an experiment now under way in the Research and Development Center for Teacher Education to test ways of training teachers to improve the coping effectiveness of their pupils. (Author)

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01.

HOW STUDENTS COPE WITH WORK PROBLEMS IN THE U.S. AND ABROAD * **

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A study is now in progress, in eight countries, to determine how children learn to cope with work tasks, in and out of school. There are two kinds of "how?" questions in this research. The first is, what are the styles of action that boys learn to use in tackling problems, different from what girls learn to do; what are the particular coping styles preferred in different cultures; and what are the differences between working class and upper-middle class in their dominant coping styles?

Such choice of strategies in dealing with tasks is also being related to school achievement, to vocational aspirations, and to the kinds of satisfactions young people seek in their work. By combining such measures of motivation and behavior style with measures of aptitude, better insight and better prediction of individual achievement is being sought.

By interviewing the parents of 10% of the 800 children in each national sample, the study also seeks information about the second "how?":

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how children are influenced by family experiences in the development of their coping styles.

This research was cooperatively planned, and is currently being carried out, by leading behavioral scientists in Brazil, England, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, the U. S. (at the University of Texas, and at the University of Chicago), and Yugoslavia. In the U. S., samples of Negro, Latin-American and Anglo-American children are being studied. These countries were chosen so as to include those whose economic development since 1945 has been most notable, while covering a range from still-developing to highly developed industrialization. The hope, of course, is to find out how the people in "successful" societies achieve their success.

The cross-national character of the study is dictated by another consideration: the almost certain likelihood that there are several different ways to cope successfully with achievement tasks. Any one society probably tends to favor one or two coping styles; but the style preferred in another society may "work" just as well, and may also fulfill some <u>other</u> important human needs. Such research is important to America, not only in order to be more perceptive about the aspirations and achievement patterns of other nations, and of minority groups in the U. S., it is just as important, to open our eyes to the total gamut of needs and the total array of coping styles which may need to be encouraged if <u>all</u> our people are to achieve maximum self-fulfillment and maximum vocational effectiveness.

The data from the first two years of testing and interviewing are just being analyzed. Some preliminary findings can be cited, however, to illustrate some of the specific ideas behind the study, and some of the interesting findings which are beginning to emerge.

For instance, one instrument is the forced-choice occupational values questionnaire. It asks the young person what satisfactions he would mainly seek in a job. Data are available for a comparison of children in Mexico and the U. S. (Texas). There are very significant differences, but not in the direction that the investigators expected. It is the Mexicans who most greatly desire success and accomplishment, intellectual stimulation and creativity. It is not so surprising that they also seek prestige. The American syndrome, by contrast, emphasises desires for security, for economic returns, for pleasant work associates, pleasant work surroundings, and variety in the work. It is the Mexican children who show the strongest drive for achievement. The Americans, perhaps because they are children of affluence, appear much more hedonistic, and much more inclined to settle for a safe, comfortable job than demand opportunity for maximum accomplishment. They seem less concerned about what they achieve through their efforts than what rewards they get. If this should happen to be an accurate foreshadowing of the future, there may be some danger that American progress will falter for lack of the drive for excellence that brought us so far. It is all the more significant, perhaps, because there are extremely few differences between middle class and working class youth in these attitudes.

On the issue of coping styles, there are some results from a pilot study comparing the U. S. with Mexico and Brazil, using an experimental Story Completion instrument. In this pilot study, a rating system was used to describe the children's style of response to ten different problem situations. Five aspects of coping behavior were scored, plus an

overall evaluation of the coping effectiveness of the response to the problem. The scales were defined as follows:

1. Coping vs. Noncoping

Coping: the story represents a reasonable effort to solve the problem whether or not the actual outcome is a successful one.

Noncoping: either there is no effort to solve the problem, or the attempt is an unrealistic or ineffectual one.

2. Active vs. Passive

This dimension is scored on the basis of the behavior of the stimulus person. If the stimulus person is the initiator of the action, the behavior is considered active. If, on the other hand, some one other than the stimulus person initiates the actions in the story, the behavior of the stimulus person is scored passive.

3. Direct vs. Indirect

If the stimulus person tries to get someone else to solve the problem for him, this would be scored indirect. If he initiates the action, which is a direct attempt to solve the problem himself, it is scored direct. Thus, a story may be scored "active and direct", or "active and indirect" but never "passive and direct". Stories may, of course, be scored "neutral" on this scale in various combinations with other scales.

4. Positive vs. Negative Affect

This dimension refers to the emotionality of the stimulus person. The expression of any positive affect such as joy, satisfaction, happiness, and the degree of such expression, are scored accordingly. Negative affect, including anger, dislike, fear, are also scored according to the degree of expression. This is the only dimension which can be

scored by inference from the behavior of the stimulus person. If, for example, the behavior of the stimulus person is considered to be hostile, although there is no overt expression of hostile words, a score on the negative end of the scale is assigned.

5. Instrumental vs. Expressive

The question asked here is: does the stimulus person take action, whether rational or not; or does he primarily emote, or describe his ideas and feelings without putting them into action.

6. Possitive vs. Negative Outcome

A positive outcome is a successful resolution of the problem whether it is a realistic solution or a wishful, fantasized solution. A negative outcome is where the problem remains unresolved or the consequences are clearly undesirable or unhappy for the stimulus person.

In each participating country, forty protocols were selected from the total sample tested, equally divided as to age, sex, and socio-economic level. The final selection contained five males and five females in the 10 year old, upper lower class group, five males and five females in the 14 year old upper lower group; and so on. The protocols were independently scored by three judges in each country with acceptable reliability.

On the coping scale, four of the ten problem-stories showed significant differences among countries; six, did not. Where there were differences, the U. S. children scored highest on three of the four problems, with the Mexicans next, and the Brazilians relatively lowest.

This pattern is curious (to an American mind) because activity, which is widely assumed to be a peculiarly American trait, was actually

highest in Brazil, in five stories, though highest in the U. S. in four other stories. Apparently activity, by itself, is not sufficient to define effective coping behavior. Indeed, although the Mexican children were most passive on all nine stories, they were not judged inferior in coping effectiveness. Their passive style of coping worked just as effectively as the active American style, in most problems, and more effectively than the active Brazilian style, in some situations.

In somewhat the same vein the children from Sao Paulo, Brazil, scored highest for directness of action in all six of the ten stories where there were significant national differences. Contrary to expectation, the U. S. children, not the Mexicans, were most indirect in four of these six stories.

The affect scale showed inter-country differences in seven stories. Of these, Brazil expressed the most positive affect in six stories, while the Mexican children showed the least positive affect in five stories.

Instrumental behavior was significantly different on four of the ten problems. In each case, the U. S. was most instrumental; the Mexicans, most expressive. The Brazilians closely resembled the Americans.

As to story outcome, six stories differentiated the national samples. Brazil was highest on five of the six, with Mexico lowest on four and the U. S. lowest on two stories.

To sum up, when the children respond to these problem stories, (which we cannot yet say is the same as their typical pattern of actual behavior),on certain kinds of problems there does tend to be a distinctive pattern of coping behavior which is different for each country.

The Brazilian pattern is to be rigorously active, direct, positive in attitude, quite highly instrumental in action and optimistic about the outcome. This all sounds very positive; and, indeed, in six of the ten problem situations it seems to work as well as other styles. Yet, in the four problems that showed national differences in coping effectiveness, the Brazilians fared poorest. This head-on personal attack on problems may overlook some considerations essential to success, or their optimistic approach may be unrealistic in some way; or these six scales may not exhaust all the factors that determine effective coping (which is likely). In any case, the Brazilian children from Sao Paulo show a distinctively lively, active kind of coping behavior.

The Mexicans, by contrast, show a much more passive, expressive, relatively less happy, somewhat pessimistic approach to these problems. Yet they actually cope as well with the problems as the children of Brazil or the U. S., on the whole, and better than the Brazilians where there is a meaningful difference.

The American children are active initiators, but they involve other people in the solution of problems (indirect). They tend to behave instrumentally rather than expressively, when there is any material difference, but they feel only moderately positive about their efforts and about the expected outcome. Nonetheless, they show the most effective coping behavior, overall, on the four problems that produced national differences.

Perhaps the most important implication, though, stems from the fact that on six of the ten problems there were no significant national differences in coping effectiveness, although the styles of coping behavior were quite different in each country. If the data from the

main study confirms this pilot analysis, it will clearly refute any simplistic stereotype that there is only one best way to tackle problems. Within the American scene, alone, we may have been trying to force children into a single coping style, to the detriment of some whose natural style is different but may be equally effective. As the Mexican children illustrate, a passive, even pessimistic approach does not prevent the effective solution of problems. Indeed, although the American stereotype calls for a highly independent, autonomous, enthusiastic attack, this is not really the way most of these American children went about it. They were much more temporal in attitude, invoked other people to help, and they were by no means highly optimistic about outcomes; yet they dealt effectively with the problems--as much, or more than the children of the other countries.

Thus, for what it is worth, a few early returns from this study suggest a pluralistic conception of achievement behavior which recognizes that there are quite different, alternative ways to deal with problems, all of which may be workable. Parents, teachers and employers can use detailed information which will help them apply this principle to individual children and workers.